Saints' Lives and Symbols

During the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, saints played an important role in both private devotion and civic life. Their stories served as models for pious Christians to emulate, and the saints were vital intermediaries for the prayers of men and women. Saints offered protection against life's dangers, from childbirth to volcanic eruptions, and many were special patrons of particular professions or trades. Most cities had patron saints, and so did most people, who were often named for the saints on whose feast days they were born. Feast days, on which special offices for particular saints were included in church services, dominated the calendar and rhythm of public life. This is echoed today by our custom of calling February 14 Saint Valentine's Day.

Saints were venerated in the Christian church as early as the second century. During the late Middle Ages, their legends were greatly elaborated in such works as the thirteenth-century *Golden Legend* by Jacobus da Voragine. This calendar of saints' lives, filled with miraculous tales, remained one of the most popular books in Europe until the Reformation and was a rich source of images for artists.

Agnes
(4th century). When Agnes, who had dedicated herself to Christ, was taken to a brothel and stripped naked, her hair grew miraculously to cover her, and she was unharmed by flames when she was burned at the stake. Finally she was pierced through the throat with a sword, still refusing to surrender her virginity. She is usually seen with a lamb (the Latin word *agnus* means "lamb") symbolic of her innocence.

Anne
(1st century). Anne, the mother of the Virgin, is not mentioned in the Bible, but she is described in many medieval religious legends. She is usually shown with Jesus and the Virgin, often holding a book. Her dress, usually red and green, is symbolic of immortality and divine love. She was patron of domestic occupations including housekeeping and laundry, and she also protected military firefighters and others.

Anthony Abbott
(251–356). Anthony Abbott retreated from wealth to live as a hermit in the Egyptian desert, resisting various temptations of the devil until his death at age 105. His great holiness attracted others who came to live near him, and so he is considered the father of Christian monasticism. Usually carrying the staff of an old man, he is often accompanied by a pig, a symbol of the sins of gluttony and lust that he was able to overcome.

Apollonia
(died about 249). Apollonia, a deaconess who was tortured by having her teeth pulled from her jaws, jumped willingly onto a fire rather than recite blasphemous words before pagan idols. When she held a cross before them, the images shattered. She is normally shown with the pincers used to pull her teeth and is, naturally, patron of dentists.

Barbara
(4th century?). Shut in a tower by her pagan father who feared she might be converted, Barbara nevertheless managed to study Christianity and be baptized. She added a third window to her tower prison to represent the Trinity, so angering her father that he had her beheaded. On his return home after the execution, he was struck by lightning. Barbara is usually shown with a tower and is patron of builders and those in danger of sudden death, especially by lightning.

Benedict
(about 480–550). Benedict founded the Benedictine order and was the author of the Benedictine rule, which laid the foundation for all Western monasticism. He was normally shown dressed in the black robes of Benedictine abbots, often holding a book (the Benedictine rule) or a rod (for corporal punishment of the brothers). Sometimes he is seen with a broken cup that held a deadly potion and with the raven who miraculously removed the poison from it. Benedict is also frequently shown with two young men of his order, Placidus and Maurus. When Placidus was in danger of drowning, Maurus walked across water to rescue him.

Catherine
(4th century?). Catherine dreamed that Jesus rejected her as a servant, saying she was not beautiful enough. After she was baptized she dreamed again, but this time the holy infant gave her a ring, accepting her not as a servant but as his wife. She confounded famous philosophers sent to convince her of the errors of her faith and protested the persecutions of other Christians. For this she was sentenced to be torn apart between spiked wheels. Miraculously the wheels burst into flames, and she was beheaded instead. Usually shown with the wheel, Catherine was considered an especially potent intercessor for human prayers and a patron of students.

Dorothy
(died about 313). As she was led to execution for refusing to worship idols, Dorothy was taunted by a heckler who demanded she bring him fruits and flowers from paradise. As she prayed in her last moments, an angel brought a basket of fruit and roses to the man, who was converted on the spot. She is usually shown with a basket of flowers.

Elizabeth of Hungary (Thuringia)
(13th century). Elizabeth, the daughter of the king of Hungary, was married to a prince killed in the Crusades and led a life of self-sacrifice. She was accepted as a Franciscan nun and is considered one of the order's greatest saints. Elizabeth is usually shown with a triple crown signifying her royal birth, her marriage, and her glorification in heaven.

Francis of Assisi
(1182?–1226). Renouncing wealth and pleasure, Francis founded the Franciscan order and based it on vows of chastity, obedience, humility, and absolute poverty. Franciscans abandoned the cloistered life of most monastic orders to preach in towns and villages, inspiring new religious fervor by their simple dedication. Saint Francis is most often shown with the stigmata, the wounds of the crucifixion that appeared on his own body as a mark of his spiritual identification with Jesus.

George
(died about 303). George, a soldier in Cappadocia (in modern Turkey), embodied the ideals of chivalry and the perfect Christian knight. His most famous legend involved a dragon that was terrorizing a town by demanding human victims. He rescued the daughter of the king, who was to be sacrificed, by subduing the beast with his lance. Using the princess' belt as a leash, he then led the dragon to town and agreed to kill it if the townspeople would accept Christianity.

Jerome
(about 341–420). Jerome retreated for many years to the desert as a hermit and is often shown in the wilderness holding a rock with which he hit himself as penance for his visions of worldly pleasures. He studied ancient languages, and, after returning to civilization, produced the first Latin translation of the Bible (the Vulgate). Thus he is also frequently shown writing. He can be identified by his cardinal's hat and by the lion from whose paw Jerome removed a thorn.

GALLERY 38

PLEASE RETURN THIS SHEET TO GALLERY 38

Illustrations of saints are details from paintings found in galleries 35A, 39, 41, and 41A.

Works in this room are described on the reverse.

Margaret
(3rd century?). Although she was probably not a historical person, Margaret's legend and cult were nevertheless popular. Among the tortures she suffered for her faith was being swallowed by a dragon, the devil in disguise. Once within the creature, the small cross she wore grew ever larger and eventually burst the dragon asunder to release her. As a result she is often seen with a dragon and is patron of childbirth.

Mary Magdalene
(1st century). Medieval legends of Mary Magdalene were composed of stories about several people named Mary. She was the great repentant sinner who was forgiven by Jesus and later stood by him, weeping at the cross. After Christ appeared to her on Easter Sunday, she was the first to take word of his resurrection to the disciples. She was also thought to be the unnamed woman who had anointed Jesus' feet in the house of Simon and was often shown in medieval representations holding an ivory unguent container.

Nicholas
(4th century). Nicholas was one of the most widely venerated saints, a bishop and miracle worker. He gave bags of money to three young girls for dowries so they would not have to become prostitutes and resurrected three murdered boys from a brine vat. Because of his patronage of children, a custom arose of giving gifts to the young on his feast day. Today he has been transformed into Santa Claus. He was usually shown in a bishop's robes and carrying a purse.

French (Ile-de-France)
Virgin and Child, about 1320/1350

The Virgin's gentle expression and elegant swaying posture are typical of the high Gothic style, in which figures are graceful, elaborately draped, and often richly decorated. Traces of gilding remain on the Virgin's elaborate crown, and the recesses in her crown and robe were designed to hold gemstones or glass ornaments. She once held a gilded stalk of lilies, a flower that symbolized her purity.

This statue was probably carved in a workshop in or near Paris, where similar depictions of the Virgin and Child were popular for precious ivory statuettes and rich manuscript illuminations as well as for large-scale sculptures. Many of the great Gothic churches in France—Paris, Chartres, Rouen, Rheims—were dedicated to the Virgin, who gained new prominence in the thirteenth century as religious focus shifted from Christ's role as judge to his role as redeemer. Mary's importance grew along with increased attention to Christ's human life and suffering, and she came to be seen as the most potent mediator between man and God. Her tender and merciful image reassured worshipers that their prayers would be heard.

The head of the infant is probably a restoration. His sentimental sweetness seems more in keeping with Victorian than medieval tastes.

Marble, height 1.008 m (39 5/8 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.99

English or Spanish
The Holy Trinity, about 1300/1350

Alabaster, which is a form of gypsum, has a number of attractive qualities for the sculptor. It is relatively soft and so can be easily carved, but it hardens slightly after exposure to air. It readily accepts gilding and colors, and its translucence suggests the glow of human skin. Because the mineral is somewhat soluble in water, however, alabaster sculpture is normally used only indoors.

The question of whether *The Trinity* was made in Spain or England remains open. This representation of the Trinity—God the Father, his crucified son, and the dove of the Holy Spirit—rests on a base decorated with the coat of arms of a Spanish family. (The base and statue, though together for many years, were probably not made together: notice how the corners of the statue were cropped to fit the shape of the base.) Although alabaster occurs in many places in Europe, the best-known quarries were in England. English workshops produced hundreds of alabasters, and Spain was one of England's largest export markets. Most surviving English alabasters, however, are different in style from this work, without its rigid pose, blocklike bulk, and smooth, immobile face. On the other hand, since so many English alabasters were destroyed by Protestant iconoclasts (from the Greek for "image smashers") in the 1500s, it may simply be that similar pieces are now lost.

Alabaster, height .853 m (33 5/8 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1953.2.1
(base donated by Mario Barsanti, 1950)

English
Saint George and the Dragon, 1370/1420

Saint George, who wears the red cross of a crusader, embodied the ideals of Christian chivalry. He has been venerated as the patron saint of England since the thirteenth century, after King Richard the Lionhearted (d. 1199) had placed himself and his army under the saint's protection when they battled Salah al-Din in the Third Crusade. Venice and other cities also claimed George as their protector, as did soldiers.

Though this statue is first recorded in a Spanish monastery, it was probably carved in England. Its fluid style, long, elegant proportions, smooth surfaces, and details of its crisp carving are characteristic of sculpture in Britain. Because it went to Spain, Saint George and the Dragon escaped the iconoclasm that destroyed many English alabasters in the early years of the Protestant Reformation, when zealots tore down monasteries and smashed religious images. Its paint and gilding are especially well preserved.

The large size of this work and the fact that it is carved fully in the round are unusual. The great majority of English alabasters were reliefs made to be placed on tables, incorporated into altarpieces, or set in wall niches. The original function of this statue is unclear. Perhaps it was part of a shrine or altar dedicated to the saint.

Alabaster, height .815 m (32 1/8 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1953.2.2

South Netherlandish
Pietà, 1450/1475

The pietà (from Italian for "pity"), the image of the Virgin supporting the lifeless body of her son, is one of the most moving images in Christian art. It seems to have originated in Germany in the fourteenth century, but it was soon widely popular. This type, in which the body of Christ lies half on the ground, first appeared around 1450.

This exquisite alabaster ranks among the finest works of Netherlandish sculpture of the mid-fifteenth century. The quiet intensity of the Virgin's grief contrasts with the harrowing realism of Christ's gaunt face and stiffened limbs. His mouth drops open, and his arm falls, a dead weight to the ground. The volume of the Virgin's robe, which cascades in a graceful pyramid of folds around her, only highlights the rigidity of her son's lifeless body.

The realism of this work is paralleled by the minute style of contemporary painting from the Netherlands (in nearby galleries). Artists, painters and sculptors alike, used realistic detail to intensify viewers' personal and emotional identification with the subject. They were meant not simply to see, but also to experience the Virgin's sorrow and Christ's suffering.

Alabaster, height .420 m (16 1/2 in.)
Patrons' Permanent Fund 1990.13.1

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The works of art discussed here are sometimes temporarily moved to other rooms or removed from display.